KOMITAS OF THE PAPUANS

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By Artsvi Bakhchinyan, Yerevan, 29 August 2023

At the beginning of the 20th century, Yervant Hagopian, an Armenian musician, later a France-based businessman and benefactor member of the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU), traveled to the Far East and Australia. Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of his adventurous life was that he was the first to write down the songs of the Papuans of New Guinea.

Hagopian was born into a poor family in the Boyacı village of Constantinople. While studying at Samatia Armenian school of Constantinople (1889-1893), Hagopian was a classmate of future eminent linguist Hrachia Acharian. After receiving musical education, he worked as a music teacher at the Aramian Armenian College of the Kadiköy district and as church choir conductor. Hagopian was also engaged in the purchasing and selling of musical instruments. In the mid-1890s, as if having a premonition of the upcoming massacres, he immigrated to South Africa. In 1897, in the capital Pretoria, Paul Kruger, the president of the South African Republic and his executive committee bought from Hagopian two Armenian manuscripts: a 15th-century Sharaknots (Hymnal) and a 17th-century Gospel, which today is called the "Golden Gospel of Pretoria." In 1915, Hagopian traveled with an Englishman to unknown territories in Africa, collected tiger skins, diamonds, ivory and sent them to Europe for sale. He also visited a cannibals' island where he was attacked by the locals. He climbed a tree, from where he was able to shoot and drive off the cannibals.

Sometime later, Hagopian appeared in Paris, where he decided to deal in precious stones and especially pearls. His plan was to travel to countries famous for precious stones, buy the stones and send them to Paris for remuneration. For travel expenses, he applied to Armenians engaged in the precious stones business, but no one agreed to finance his travel expenses. Hagopian applied to Jewish merchants, who agreed to fund him, but with tough conditions which Hagopian accepted.

He first went to the Persian Gulf, where the best pearls were procured, but facing a steep competition, he headed east. He visited India, China, Japan, Indonesia, the Philippines (where he met an Armenian in the American military base), studied the local markets. After concluding they were not suitable, he went to Australia.

Hagopian lived for some time in Sydney where he befriended an Oceanian named Ayeh, who told him that pearls could be easily found in the coastal regions of New Guinea, the homeland of the Papuans. When a schooner with five Papuans from New Guinea arrived in Sydney, Hagopian traveled to Guinea with the natives. On the way, one of the Papuans touched Hagopian's arm and said that being fat, Hagopian was suitable to become food. Hagopian, who had learned Papuan language, understood what the cannibal had said. For five days and five nights Ayeh and Hagopian stayed awake armed with a single weapon, a ten-shot American rifle. On the ship, Hagopian began to study the life of Papuans and their main traits. He was amazed to see natives use shards of broken bottle to shave without cutting their skin and sewing thick animal skin to their feet without feeling pain because of hardened skin. For four years, Hagopian studied in detail the customs and habits of

the natives. Being a musician, he wrote down 26 Guinean songs. During those four years, Hagopian and his friends always spent the night on board the ship. He befriended the English postmaster general who was the 14th in that position—all previous officials had been killed and eaten. The Englishman said he worked in that dangerous place because of the large salary.

One day, when Hagopian went for a walk in the forest with his four friends (he had been chosen as the leader of the group because of his height), they were surrounded by about 500 cannibals. Positioning themselves on the trees, they started shooting and killed 67 Papuans, the others ran away, but an arrow wounded Hagopian. Fortunately, the arrow was not poisoned.

Despite the difficult conditions, Hagopian managed to amass some wealth. He collected pearl shells on the coast and sent them to Paris to his Jewish companions, who exploited him by buying the pearls for 100 francs instead of 1,000. Having fallen sick with yellow fever, Hagopian was forced to return to Europe. Established in Dinard, Brittany, he became a French citizen. In 1913 he wrote to AGBU President Boghos Noubar, noting that "I am not a rich person, but I love my homeland more than myself." He sent a 25,000 francs check (at that time equal to 1,000 pounds sterling) and asking for the annual percentage of the donation to be allocated to the needs of Talvorik village in Sasoun, Western Armenia. It is not known why Hagopian chose specially this village.

In 1919, Hagopian made a new will, bequeathing his wealth to Armenian and French organizations, as well as to Armenia. He died in 1923 in Dinard. As Hagopian was not married, his relatives tried to inherit his wealth (equal to around 400,000 francs), but in 1926 representatives of Soviet Armenia succeeded to take some part of the will money allocated to Armenia. With part of the money schools were built in three Armenia villages mostly inhabited by refugees from Sasoun and Mush; later a vocational school in Martuni.

It is not known whether the Papuan songs, written down by Hagopian, have survived and whether Papua New Guinea specialists are aware of his activities as an ethnomusicologist.

There are no comments yet.